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SUBJECT Gorbachev/Visit to France

BOB EDWARDS: Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev begins a four-day visit to France today. The visit comes some six weeks before Gorbachev is due to hold a summit meeting with President Reagan in Geneva.

Last night, as Gorbachev was speaking on French television, French President Francois Mitterrand announced he will not attend a meeting of Western leaders in New York later this month, a meeting called by President Reagan to discuss the Geneva summit.

From Paris, NPR's Neil Conan reports.

NEIL CONAN: There has been a lot of resentment here at the way President Reagan seems to have summoned Western leaders to the pre-summit meeting. French leaders often complain, as well, that the United States doesn't consult them enough. But the timing of the announcement of the New York meeting, just days before the Soviet leader was due to arrive in Paris, came at an awkward moment for Francois Mitterrand. With the French President also still suffering from the embarrassment of the Rainbow Warrior bombing in New Zealand, a demonstration of French independence from the United States may have been calculated to help Mitterrand's sagging political popularity, as well.

The result wasn't total, though. The announcement from the Elysee Palace said that Mitterrand would be happy to meet President Reagan at another time. More importantly, the French government confirmed yesterday that it will not go along with one of the main Soviet objectives of Mikhail Gorbachev's visit, a joint Franco-Soviet communique denouncing President Reagan's strategic defense initiative.

The French have been the most vocal opponents of Star Wars in Western Europe, but an Elysee spokesman said yesterday, "We wouldn't think of embarrassing our ally."

In an extraordinary appearance on French television last night, Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev confirmed that building European opposition to Star Wars was one of the principal aims of his visit. He spoke in apocalyptic terms about the threat posed by space-based weapons. "Tension is mounting in the world," he said. "It's possible that we're heading for a nuclear catastrophe. Right now the situation is like a tinderbox ready to explode."

Later, when he was asked what made him so pessimistic, he told French television reporters, "We're at a crossroads. The development of space weapons creates a situation where things can get out of control." And he went on to remark that even discussion of this question was becoming difficult because of what he described as being militarization of political consciousness."

Gorbachev spoke only in general terms and revealed no details of the arms control proposals under negotiation in Geneva. He looked very stiff reading a formal 25-minute statement from behind a big desk, but was relaxed and confident during the interview segment, sitting around a table with French reporters. The now famous Gorbachev smile was playing around the corners of his mouth during most of the interview, but it vanished when he was pressed on the question of human rights. He visibly tensed as the subject moved from Andrei Sakharov to Jewish emigration. Then when he was asked whether it was true that there are four million political prisoners in Soviet gulags, he abruptly cut the conversation off: "Let's not talk about this anymore."

About 3000 people gathered in the Place Trocadero in Paris last night to denounce the Soviet record on human rights. The slogan was, "Gorbachev Gulag."

The French Government does not allow street demonstrations during state visits, so this was the last of the big rallies before the Gorbachev visit.

During the interview with Gorbachev last night, one of the French reporters remarked that France was awaiting the visit with interest and suspicion.

A French expert on Soviet affairs, Jacques Rouknight (?), of the Institut de Science Politique, said that Gorbachev can expect a skeptical reception in light of the dramatic change in the Soviet Union's image here over the past ten years.

JACQUES ROUKNIQUE: The intellectuals have abandoned Marxism, discovered the gulag, discovered the horrors of the Soviet system. Generally speaking, in public opinion polls, the image of the Soviet Union is very bad, in all respects, not only for its international behavior -- that was very strongly influenced by Afghanistan -- but also as the domestic system, it no longer inspires people on the Left, or even within the Communist Party there are strong critical voices.

CONAN: Both sides, of course, are stressing the Franco-Soviet aspects of this visit and deny that it's merely a prelude to the Geneva summit. Last night, for example, Mikhail Gorbachev mentioned the United States by name just once.

And Jacques Roukniue says that the two main Soviet goals here are to see if Star Wars can be used as a wedge between the United States and its West European allies and to influence Washington as well.

ROUKNIQUE: Certainly Geneva must be on his mind. This is, after all, the main target of his. But I think that the two things are -- can't be really separated. He believes that a good way to put pressure on the Americans is to show that there is a significant body of European public opinion which opposes the Star War project, and that the only way to make progress in Geneva is to forget about Star Wars and follow some of his radical proposals for disarmament.

CONAN: After the Soviet General Secretary arrives this afternoon, he'll have dinner with President Mitterrand....